

# Re-traumatisation, fear and suicidal thinking: a case study of 'boatpeople' from Australia

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Ninety percent of "boatpeople" who make it to Australia's migration zone are assessed as legitimate refugees and given Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) allowing them to stay in Australia for three years in the first instance. The aim of this paper is to pinpoint aspects of re-traumatisation, fear mistrust as stressors for one individual living on a TPV. This paper identifies how discrete elements in the recent and distant past interact with the present forming a re-traumatising environment with ongoing psychosocial stressors and changes in mental distress. The paper is based upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork with people released from Australian Immigration Detention facilities.

## Opening Quote

*It's cold out, it's overcast, but I haven't seen a more glorious day in this area for quite a while. It's absolutely gorgeous because we don't have to live in fear.*

-LINDA RIVERA, when a harrowing three-week ordeal came to an end when police arrested two suspects in the sniper shooting spree that left 10 slain and three wounded in the United States. (New York Times, 25 October 2002)

The important point is that Linda Rivera no longer needed to live her life in fear and uncertainty. The unidentified sniper and his accomplice had for three weeks during 2002 closed schools, emptied shopping malls and busy streets, and turned petrol stations and outdoor restaurants into uninhabited sculptures. The knowledge of a sniper on the loose deliberately targeting innocent people at random and without mercy had robbed the city of its freedom

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and humanity. People in the streets of Washington had been used as target practice. Ten people were dead.

Every day when we turn on the television we are confronted with images, sometimes shocking, that depict a changing and unpredictable world. Of course, we can choose to turn our eyes away, but for many people global change affects their daily lives and is inextricably linked to what they say, do, think and feel. Global change constitutes a revolution of sorts that raises many pertinent issues affecting our social and emotional lives. As Anthony Giddens (1999) explains it, globalisation is no longer an “out there” phenomenon. It is “in here”, impacting on the most intimate aspects of people’s lives. Globalisation has resulted in a world no longer determined or restricted by national boundaries - information, technology, capital and people can cross the globe more or less unimpeded. As a result, the character of society has changed.

### **Seeking Asylum to Australia**

Australia is the only country in the world to rule mandatory indefinite detention for people arriving to its shores claiming asylum without authorised documents. Research studies in Australia and elsewhere suggest that people within immigration detention have generally suffered greater levels of past trauma than others in similar circumstances who are not in detention (Becker, and Silove, 1993; Bracken and Gorst-Unsworth, 1991; Thompson and McGorry, 1998) and this has been seen to contribute to a worsening of their mental health problems, with their detention providing a re-traumatising environment (Commonwealth Ombudsman Report; Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade, Human Rights Sub-Committee Report, 2001; Kenny, Silove, and Steel, 2004; Procter, 2003; Steel and Silove, 2001; Silove, Steel and Watters, 2000). Nine out of every ten “boatpeople” who make it to Australia’s migration zone have been given three year Temporary Protection Visas (TPV’s), allowing them to stay in Australia in the first instance. Between July 1999 and June 2002, there were 9160 “unauthorised boat arrivals” who applied for protection under the United Nations convention on reaching Australia. By early 2003, 8260 of these had been given visas – a 90 per cent success rate (Morris, 2003). Under the conditions of a TPV such people cannot

leave Australia with the hope of returning, be re-united with their families and have access to a limited range of social security benefits.

### **People and Feelings Travel**

When people travel or migrate to Australia (anywhere, really) they bring with them their personal histories and interpretations of phenomena that are mediated through recent experiences such as trauma, dislocation, persecution and feelings of belonging or not belonging in a society or culture. Mohammad (not his real name) works at the meatworks in Murray Bridge, a semi-rural town in South Australia. He came to Australia by boat as a refugee more than two years ago to live in a democracy. He said"

*The boat I came here on looked more like a coffin than a boat. But it was a risk I had to take to escape war and fundamentalism in Afghanistan. I lived everyday in fear in my country. I could not tell the truth about anything. Daylight could not be called daylight if the Taliban did not like it. We could not trust people in government to help us have human rights, as the government of Pashtuns and Tadjiks did not want us there. We could not question them. We had to obey blindly.*

For our newest arrivals, many of whom are refugees and asylum seekers such as Mohammad, suicide is a real option. This is due in part to everyday experiences being collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations, rather than being external or unrelated. When Mohammad arrived in Australia he was placed in Port Hedland Detention Centre. He was interviewed many times by Immigration officials and was eventually granted a temporary protection visa (TPV). He was told that the three-year TPV would give the Australian government time to find out if he was a good person, a person of good character. Mohammad said, "OK, so they don't know me, that makes sense. I will work hard and show them that I am a good person". But now, nearly three years later, he is feeling terribly let down by what he was told and uncertain about his future.

Local and global issues and influences are intimately connected and difficult to reconcile. People escaping persecution can have a

continuing sense of fear and mistrust. Mohammad described this phenomenon when he said"

*Everything that I have done, every time I go to the doctor or Centrelink, the government knows what I am doing. They record it here. If I do anything wrong they record it here. And I have done nothing wrong. I am still hearing day and night over and over in my head what Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, told us:*

*Uzbeks can go to Uzbekistan*

*Tajiks can go to Tajikstan*

*Hazaras can go to Goristan (graveyard)."*

Personal histories and experiences that might appear disparate and worlds apart can continue to deeply influence interpretations of local experiences while simultaneously influencing interpretation of events in the wider world. Robertson (1995) refers to this phenomena as "glocalisation". For example, Mohammad feels that his fate in Australia is now back with those who persecuted him in Afghanistan, while at the same time interpreting events back in Afghanistan as largely shaped by local processes. Mohammad is a Hazara. He gets worried and frightened when the Australian government uses an interpreter to ask him questions, because the interpreter is usually a Pashtun or a Tadzjik. "...the people who did not want us in Afghanistan do not want us in Australia", he said. Mohammad finds it hard to trust others. "I lived in a society that it was hard to trust others. It takes time for us to trust others."

### **Memory and Trust**

When people arrive to Australia their application for asylum is considered in light of the information they can supply and any facts known about the country they are fleeing. Some people in detention and at times of re-applying for permanent protection suffer a denial of credibility due to inconsistencies of their story and this may lead to claims being dismissed on grounds of minor discrepancies. This situation appears at times to have a flow-on effect whereby it is difficult for therapeutic trust to be developed between mental health provider and person in or released from immigration detention.

Mental distress and emotional disorders can and will impact upon the quality of information people can remember. Where the experience is highly traumatic (for example, a situation involving serious injury to the person) the situation is considered even more complex. There may be important differences between traumatic and non-traumatic memories. For example, initial recall of traumatic events by people with post traumatic stress disorder typically does not involve normal narrative memory. In other words, the story of what happened may be fragmented and therefore appearing inconsistent. Recent research in the UK has found that people seeking asylum who have post-traumatic stress at the time of their interviews are systematically more likely to have their claims rejected the longer their application takes (Herlihy, et.al. 2002).

Mohammad worries about having to return to Afghanistan after his TPV expires. “People are being kidnapped or killed for money when they return to Afghanistan from Australia”, he said. To help him cope with his distress he takes medication to help him sleep and anti-depressants prescribed by a GP after he attempted to kill himself. Mohammad says that all the Afghan people he knows in Murray Bridge are taking tablets at night and/or during the day to help them cope and to stop them from killing themselves. Mohammad described his experience of living:

*I feel that I am being pushed to the edge of the world. Whenever I go walking in Murray Bridge, I don't even know if am in Australia or Afghanistan. I know I am in Australia but I don't belong. I'm here but the future is not clear. I feel as if I am walking blindfolded on the moon. It is like I am not really here (Mohammad points to the ground) ... and I am not really anywhere. It is a strange feeling. It is like I am dead. But it is not like I am not alive either. It is more like being both dead and alive at the same time. Sometimes I talk to myself when I walk. I don't know why I do this ... perhaps to stay strong. It just happens that way. And now I feel that what Mullah Omah said should happen to me is actually happening to me. I am going to the graveyard like he said I should go.*

**Memory and the Re-traumatising Effects of Electronic and Print Media**

In interviews with media outlets ranging from the national John Laws on radio program and the National Nine Television Network's News and Current Affairs Program, A Current Affair, Port Lincoln Mayor, Peter Davis, told reporters in June 2002:

*They can use the recalcitrant illegal immigrants as live target practice ... the same as galahs ... settle down boys, or you might be buried. We'll only have to shoot a few to get the message across.*

After Mr Davis made the comments the Refugee Advocacy Service of South Australia made a complaint to the then Director of Public Prosecutions, Paul Rolfe QC. After an investigation, Mr Rolfe said he regarded the comments as "offensive and ill-informed", but had found no legal breach of the South Australian Racial Vilification Act. "Thus, there being no reasonable prospects of conviction, there would be no charges", he said. It appeared that Australians could easily commiserate with the Washington residents' fear at being used for target practice but less so with the equally intense fears of refugees within our own shores.

After Peter Davis's comments, Dr Habib, an educated man and Mohammad's friend, killed himself by hanging from live powerlines in Murray Bridge. Mohammad said Dr Habib killed himself because he could read English.

*He knew what was happening. He knew what was being said about us in the Australian newspapers. One day he read in the local newspaper about an Australian Mayor, Peter Davis, who said we were "good for target practice". He said to me "everywhere we go we cannot escape our fate to go to the Goristan (graveyard) ... we have no rights in Afghanistan or in Australia.*

Mohammad told Dr Habib that this was just one person making these comments – not all Australians. But Dr Habib felt the same fear as Linda Rivera who's quote opened this paper and who dodged the flying bullets of the Washington sniper. His personal interpretation of trauma in Afghanistan and perceptions of him by others in Australia were mediated by a historical consciousness of the recent and distant past as well as an uncertain future. Mental health and wellbeing in Mohammad's and Dr Habib's world (and many thousands of others like them) are interdependent upon events thousands of kilometres away as well as the actions, beliefs, and attitudes of people at a local level. Both individuals and or-

ganisations within the media need to recognise how pivotal their role is in helping people like Dr Habib feel safe in Australia. Government policy, rhetoric and media reporting of this needs to take far more careful thought and responsibility for the power they exert over some of the world's most traumatised people. Dr Habib was only 45 years old and had a wife and three children back in Afghanistan.

Mohammad is trying to help himself by taking medication, listening to relaxation music, working and staying with friends. But every day is a struggle. He says he cries at night and walks the streets of Murray Bridge alone and in fear. He sleeps only four or five hours a night, sometimes less. Nevertheless, he says he feels "lighter" when he talks to others. He says he needs to talk, open up and begin trusting others. Mohammad says:

*Everybody I talk to says that genuine refugees have a different visa. But it is Australian government policy that I have a TPV and they can't do anything about it. I tell them the Australian government told me that I am a genuine refugee! But why should I have the same fate as a non-genuine refugee? The worst thing you can take from a human being is their hope. There is no one here in Australia who can make my life worse. There is nothing darker than black.*

## **Conclusion**

Mohammad's story illustrates how individual mental health and the development of trust and a sense of belonging must be seen as phenomena influenced by powerful elements of identity, belonging, bonding and a historical consciousness.

Mohammad's story also illustrates the crucial linkages between freedom, (lack of) trust, acceptance, support and understanding from the Australian government. For refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, individual mental health and wellbeing is concerned with physical conditions such as certainty of place, legal governance and the effects of grief and dislocation.

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